

to promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which
are here in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church;
to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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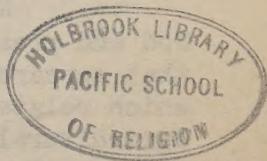
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SOILS AND SOULS

Dr. Ide P. Trotter*



As an agricultural worker, it is a privilege for me to work with both those who make a living from the soil, and those who lead and guide them in their daily activities and spiritual lives. As a layman, I would like to take a Bible text for my topic, which is "Soils and Souls", and try to give you my ideas as to relationship between the soil and the souls of our people — particularly our rural people.

May I read to you the first verse of the text I propose to use, from the first chapter of Genesis. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." The emphasis that I would like to place on that verse is that the first thing created was the heavens — and only second to the creation of the heavens came the creation of the earth.

We can take that idea one step further and say that "earth" in that sense does not simply mean a planet as we see pictured on a globe. If we are to be practical, we must take it in the small units with which we are familiar. And to me and for my purpose, the earth means the soil — the soil on which we stand and from which we live, the second creation of God.

I would charge each of us with the necessity of going back to these fundamentals, to the beginnings, and building our thinking, living and preaching on those fundamentals. We in the rural community have an opportunity that no other group has, to preach that the soil is not only primary in God's order of creation but that it is fundamental and primary in the lives of all human beings. We might go further and say that it is primary in all life, human or otherwise, which is exactly true. We can preach that the soil, as the first earthly creation of God, is sacred. I would emphasize next that it is essential in every activity that we know as human beings. I would then preach, and with all the emphasis I could muster, the fact that the soil, in a very vital sense, is irreplaceable. So far as we know, if the soil that God has given us is allowed to be completely wasted or destroyed, there is no basis for hope that it can be replaced short of another creation such as that about which we have read.

Therefore, I would emphasize the fact that God gave us the soil to use.

An address by Dr. Ide P. Trotter, Director of Texas Agricultural Extension Service, before the first Annual Rural Church Conference, College Station, September, 1946. We are glad to present this, both because of the profound and helpful manner in which Dr. Trotter has treated this subject, and as an example of the significant contribution which some of the Agricultural Colleges are making to the Christian Rural Life Movement.

The soil is, in my thinking, God's means of supporting all life on earth. There is no other means whereby life can be maintained other than through some direct or indirect use of the soil He has given us. He has placed in us a trust, that we use the soil efficiently and permanently. We are not only charged by God to use the soil effectively, but should we misuse it in any unnecessary manner, we are responsible to God. I can very readily say that we are mocking God if we misuse the soil.

We should use this heritage carefully, and in doing so we are honoring God and preserving His earliest earthly creation. There is no figure of speech that appears in the Bible more often, I believe, than those figures of speech which relate the Christian and the Christian life to agriculture and some type of agricultural activity. Since we are charged with being good husbandmen, we must follow some of the thinking that I have presented briefly.

As a Rural Preacher, or as one influencing rural people, I would like to point out that these rural people, like the soil, are an essential part of our economic and social structure. They are as essential and as irreplaceable as is the soil in our livelihood and our sustenance. Quite often, our rural people are inclined to overlook the fact that they are so essential and that without the work that they do and the produce that they make available, none can live, whether they be on farms or in cities. They are, in a very peculiar sense, partners with God in their daily lives, seeking to understand Him and work in the manner which He has prescribed. They are, I believe, seeking constantly to do His will.

Therefore, we come to the application of science in the use of the soil in serving God and our fellow men. I believe that, after all, science strives on to reveal to us God, working in and through His creation. If we will be critical and analytical, we will recognize that when an ordinary human being discovers some new force in the world, such as the atomic force, we are not permitted by any logic of reason to feel that that force has just momentarily been created so far as we know. The potentialities of that force have been there in front of us and available to us all the time if we learn how to get hold of them. In other words, God's law for the operation of the universe which He created so far as we know have not changed since they were laid down when earth was created. What we are constantly doing is striving to find what those laws and possibilities are, and as we uncover one after the other, we are striving to make use of them in a sound and constructive manner. Our purpose as it relates to agriculture, is to find out what God's laws are with relation to His creatures and His creation, and how we may make use of them.

We can preach God in the everyday but profound facts of life. He is revealed in that manner, and there is no more appropriate way of revealing Him than through rural life, which is so close to God's creation. God is the source of all our power. I will mention briefly one sense in which He is an all-powerful source, a marvelous basis for many sermons.

We in our egotism feel that we are the guardians and guides of the power of the world and that we, by some twist of our imagination are responsible for and are the creators of the power that operates our machines and all our industries. We know that the only real source of power that our physicists tell us about is God's sun. They tell us that that power is created by a means of which they are not sure, and that it is transmitted to the earth through invisible waves. Yet with all our machinery we are not able to go out and capture all the power of the sun. But God created it and made available to us green leaves which are constantly capturing and providing us with God's power. The scientists of all the ages

haven't yet discovered how to duplicate it.

Now what does that mean? I think it means, first, that these simple, everyday factors in daily life are miracles from God just as truly as any miracles recorded in the Bible. A leaf captures God's power, converts it through its plant processes into material which finally creates our coal, oil and all of the other sources of power which we know. When you operate your automobile, you are actually running on power that was originally captured from the sun by a green leaf. That is another connection between soils and souls that is vital to us. It is, I believe, as great a miracle as has been recorded anywhere.

Let us turn to one other passage and read from the first chapter of Genesis, twenty-eighth verse: "And God blessed them, and God said unto them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth.'" Here we face a statement that God charged us, all people, to be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth. Since I was a youngster, I have heard that passage interpreted as meaning that God's children are charged with being fruitful in the sense of repopulating the earth and multiplying in the sense of repopulating the earth. It has been related to the matter of bringing into the earth more of God's children, which is, of course, a natural interpretation. However, when we take the third statement "replenish the earth" and also take it to mean repopulate the earth, I do not believe it is a logical or necessary interpretation. That interpretation places the same meaning on all three of the separate statements in the passage. I do prefer to leave the population emphasis on the first two statements -- "Be fruitful and multiply", but when God said "replenish the earth," I think He meant exactly that. He meant rebuild it, maintain it, build up its fertility and replenish it so that it can better support the people that depend on it.

If we replenish the earth only in the sense of population, there is absolutely no hope for peace or Christian survival on this planet. We have, as you well know, a constant race between the population of the earth and the food supply, and we cannot as Christian leaders overemphasize the population phase of the passage and underemphasize a phase that is just as legitimate an interpretation.

So, I would like to stress to our people that it is God's charge in that passage that we replenish this soil and rebuild its fertility and its God-given power to support and sustain God's children. If we make it possible, by caring for the earth, for the soil to do a better job of maintaining the people who work and live on it, we are enabling that soil to support God's plants, while those plants in turn support God's children, who support God's church. That is a logical, inevitable and, I think, the only sound interpretation of that relationship.

I would like to place some emphasis on a few other Biblical angles of the agricultural problem. We are reminded in the Scriptures that if we love God, we will feed His lambs. We are not told in direct words just what to feed them with, but there is no other way to feed them, either figuratively or actually, except through God's plants. And I repeat that if we do not maintain God's soil and permit it to grow a sufficient number of well-nourished plants, we cannot follow the mandate of feeding God's lambs. God has indicated repeatedly through all of the Scriptures that He does not want any of His creatures to starve. We find in the Bible multiplied illustrations of God's interest in his people in seeing that they are properly fed. And today, we have had world-wide attention focused on the problem of starving humanity, and that attention is far greater than ever before. I personally question whether the problem is any greater now than it has been at other times in the world's history. The difficulty in the days past was that nobody could hear

about it beyond the environs of the particular area where the starvation was rampant.

We know that starvation is rampant, and as human beings we are trying to do everything we can to prevent this suffering of God's children. I would like to give that matter just a slightly different turn, with which I would charge you.

We gladly give our means and our time to relieve a suffering and starving animal or human being. We have seen enough of that to realize what it means. I would like to propose what may be a difficult question, but one I hope you will think through thoroughly if it doesn't appear to be pertinent today. I would like to ask, in the light of God's creation, "Is a plant any less God's creation than an animal?" I do not mean that plants are of the same order or of the same importance as animals. I am simply saying that they are also one of God's creations.

I would then like for us to preach to our rural people that these plants that they deal with are sacred gifts of God and that they are available for use, not abuse. That relationship is followed throughout our Bible stories in the illustrations and parables based on the seed and the marvelous power of the seed. The seed, of course, is merely the progenitor of the plant and makes possible the reproduction from generation to generation of God's plants. The plant, in turn, reaches the stage of flowering, and the fruit is produced, as well as the seed for the succeeding generation.

That cycle of nature in plant life is implied all through the Bible, is enacted every season on every farm, yard, and garden. Yet we do not realize the importance, the sacredness or the possibilities of some of these plant miracles for use in our daily ministry. Therefore, I would say, in terms of the Scripture -- if ye love me, feed my plants — because, as I have said, only by that means can we feed God's lambs, just one step removed in the logical order.

We find that plants surrounding us starve every year and few of us notice it or pay any particular attention unless it occurs to such a vast extent that it seriously disturbs our local or our national economy. But, nevertheless, that basic problem goes back to the starvation of an individual plant. Whether these plants starve from lack of moisture to make available the plant food that God has placed in the soil, or whether it be from misuse of the soil, the fact remains that these plants have died and we haven't done anything about it. We have not replenished the soil.

If we believe that we have any responsibility for carrying out God's charge to take care of His creatures, we might equally well apply that responsibility to the human beings, the animals and plants that God has created. Not only is that a religious opportunity and a religious charge in the sense which we are considering now, but it is plain ordinary horse sense. If plant starve in any quantity, that means that the men and the animals who depend on plants for a livelihood will starve. Consequently this exact chain is followed: the man starves, the community starves, the church starves, in exactly that order.

I think we can say to our rural people with all the strength we possess that nothing has ever succeeded over a long period of time on a poor and worn-out soil. That means that in your community as well as in other parts of the world, you and your church, the welfare of your people and your community is irrevocably tied to the fertility and productivity of the soil for which we have a responsibility.

There are probably men here today who have gone across the world to areas where the sacredness of the soil was not respected. If there are any here who went across North Africa with our armies, you have probably walked across the top of several successive civilizations which failed to carry out the charge that we are talking of now. You saw the ghostly remains of marble temples built at a time when those soils in that area were productive. These temples now stand as stark naked blots on a barren desert soil. It can happen here.

May I, in conclusion, say to you that our great privilege, as both agricultural workers and rural preachers, is to preach God as being revealed in nature around us, as being the Creator not only of ourselves, but of all that we deal with, and that we are His servants in the use — not the abuse — of those resources, and that we can truly preach God in grass just as well as in the Gospel devoid of practical application.